

**FIVE
FOR
FIVE**
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**FOREWORD BY
MELVIN VAN PEEBLES**

**INTRODUCTION BY
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HALLELUJAH—FIVE! (as in high five, as in give me five)—Our man Spike has a fifth feature under his belt! An African-American has five, bona fide, big-time, talking pictures, out there, with more to come! FRANKLY, to tell the Truth, I was beginning to despair, then . . . all of a sudden—BAM!, it happened—and dere dey came changing up de hill! (Like my Grandmother used to say, referring to the Lord lending a helping hand with the rent, or a pair of new shoes, "HE may not come when you call HIM, but HE'S ALWAYS RIGHT ON TIME!")

Well, my grief was a little more abstract than rent, or shoes (and, thank-you-Jesus, a little premature). I was grieving over us African-Americans in the entertainment/communication media (especially filmmakingwise) not having any significant say in the way we were being portrayed, and not being able to project OUR OWN images of ourselves, OUR OWN interpretations of reality. (A crucial link in maintaining our heritage, and a key element to our present and future survival as a People.)

You see, about thirty-five years ago, circa 1955, I had had it with White Folks pushing their mythmaking machinery on us, running their bullshit from colonialism, to paternalism, to programmed genocide . . . after 400 years enough was ENOUGH. So I ate shit for the next fifteen years, including making two feature films, the first one—get this—as a French Director, thereby embarrassing Hollywood into finally giving a couple of Bloods a shot. (Up until then Hollywood had maintained that Jungle Bunnies weren't no way ready to be handling no stuff that complicated.)

Anyway, Jump cut to 1970. When I figured I was gonna finally change all that White Folks running the movie industry crap . . . my third feature, SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSSSS SONG was ready to go! You see, I figured if I could just get SWEETBACK out there, overnight, IF NOT SOONER, Black Folks would be swarming all over the feature film business doing their thing.

Well, I pulled it off. I not only got the film into distribution, but it made a piss pot full of money. (Frankly I never expected SWEETBACK to become the financial success it became, that was an unexpected blessing . . . The Truth is I would have been deliriously happy just to break even and not getting my legs broken by disgruntled lenders. NOTE: I said LENDERS, not INVESTORS, because although I did manage to get some folks to LOAN me money, I couldn't get anyone to take an equity position in my harebrained scheme to make a movie where a nigger got away wid standing up to the Man.)

The profits that poured in, thanks to the uppity concept I introduced (BLACK HERO, NOT ONLY SURVIVING BEYOND THE FINAL FRAME OF THE PICTURE, BUT ACTUALLY WINNING), were not lost on Hollywood . . . No Sireee. Hollywood quickly adopted the concept, bringing out a tidal wave of Blaxploitation movies, along the way injecting a lethal political twist that defused my original message of self-determination, to a counter-revolutionary one by turning the hero into a tool (albeit a pseudo-maverick one), detective/undercover-agent/renegade-cop/extension of the Authorities, a.k.a. Bawana, a.k.a. the Status Quo, a.k.a. the Man Himself. But the political implications of the scenario was only my FIRST grenade . . . I had

TWO! With the second grenade I wanted to blow up the idea that without his assistance we were helpless. What I was shooting for was to prove by example to Black Folks that we could do it completely by ourselves, without Massa's grants, approbations, or blessings. When the movie turned out to be a box office smash I felt that it was only a matter of seconds before a regiment of homeboys and girls would be storming up the hill to tear down the gates of Hollywood. I dug a foxhole and waited for reinforcement . . . I waited and waited . . .

Days, weeks, years rolled by . . . peeping over the rim of the trench I saw the majority of Black cinematographers denied the big prize of making feature films forced to ply less prestigious versions of the trade—shorts, documentaries, commercials, and videos. Occasionally (denied, or not) every now and then a lone African-American would come charging out of the forest with a finished feature tucked under his arm like a battering ram, heading up the hill for the gates to the Big-Time: Gordon Parks, Ossie Davis, Michael Schultz, Jamaa Fanaka, Sidney Poitier, Bill Greaves, St. Clair Bourne, Stan Lathan, Bill Gunn, and a few valiant others . . . but, Alas, by the time Homey reached the Hollywoodian gates, lacking a support system, he would be too exhausted to break down the door, or if successful in crashing the barrier would find himself being slowly preempted, allowed to make a film or two, then subtly touted by the racist system as the rule rather than the exception.

In the years after SWEETBACK there were less than 20 films actually controlled by African-Americans—That's what I was crouched in my hole grieving about . . . another DREAM DEFERRED. There I was . . . my canteen of FAITH bone-dry, my rations of HOPE long since gone, "Darky before the dawn," as they say, and all the rest, when . . . BAM!, like I mentioned before—what do I hear?

"TA-RA-TE-TA-TA-DAA!" a bugle blowing, CHAAARRGEEEE! . . .

I sit up look around and there is this wave of African-American filmmakers barreling up the hill (not a solitary filmmaker, easily picked off—NO, not this time). Here they come! . . . an endless row of young Black Filmmakers, charging up the road, stretching as far as the imagination can see and still growing, Directors like Robert Townsend, Keenen Ivory Wayans, Charles Burnett, my son Mario, Euzhan Palcy, Charles Lane, The Hudlin Brothers, etc. . . . Writers, Producers, Casting Directors, Lighting Directors, Editors, et al. . . . magnificent creatures, supportive towards one another, disciplined, clever, courageous, Wise to the ways of the Man, and Hip to the ways of the Street . . . and THERE leading the charge carrying the old banner of Self-Determination that Oscar Micheaux had stitched together so long ago, the Main-Man HIMSELF, Spike Lee.

WELL, like I said, HALLELUJAH. YES, Grandma was RIGHT, "HE may not come when you call HIM, but HE'S ALWAYS RIGHT ON TIME!"

It is impossible to explain the thrill I experience when I see DIRECTED BY flashing across the screen with a Black name attached to it, or when I hear young Black filmmakers reply, when asked where-in-Heavens-name did they acquire the audacity to take on the system, mention me and SWEETBACK as their inspiration.

SPEAKING OF THRILLS, Spike has finished his fifth feature film, a momentous occasion if there ever was one. WELL, I would like to carve THANKS to him on his milestone from all African-Americans . . . and the rest of the world too (whether they know it or not, YET).

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES

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